

for resolution. Perhaps a general intolerance of contradictions produces an acute awareness of the enormous complexities of acquiring an additional language, and so perhaps around the age of 14 or 15, the prospect of learning a second language becomes overwhelming, thus discouraging the learner from proceeding a step at a time as a younger child would do.

The final consideration in the cognitive domain is the distinction that Ausubel made between **rote** and **meaningful learning**. Ausubel noted that people of all ages have little need for rote, mechanistic learning that is not related to existing knowledge and experience. Rather, most items are acquired by meaningful learning, by anchoring and relating new items and experiences to knowledge that exists in the cognitive framework. It is a myth to contend that children are good rote learners, that they make good use of meaningless repetition and mimicking. We have already seen in Chapter 2 that children's practice and imitation is a very meaningful activity that is contextualized and purposeful. Adults have developed even greater concentration and so have greater ability for rote learning, but they usually use rote learning only for short-term memory or for somewhat artificial purposes. By inference, we may conclude that the foreign language classroom should not become the locus of excessive rote activity: rote drills, pattern practice without context, rule recitation, and other activities that are not in the context of meaningful communication.

It is interesting to note that C2-A2 comparisons almost always refer, in the case of children, to natural untutored learning, and for adults, to the classroom learning of a second language. Even so, many foreign language classrooms around the world still utilize an excessive number of rote-learning procedures. So, if adults learning a foreign language by rote methods are compared with children learning a second language in a natural, meaningful context, the child's learning will seem to be superior. The cause of such superiority may not be in the age of the person, but in the context of learning. The child happens to be learning language meaningfully, and the adult is not.

The cognitive domain holds yet other areas of interest for comparing first and second language acquisition. These areas will be treated more fully in Chapters 4 and 5. We turn now to what may be the most complex, yet the most illuminating, perspective on age and acquisition: the affective domain.

## AFFECTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

Human beings are emotional creatures. At the heart of all thought and meaning and action is emotion. As "intellectual" as we would like to think we are, we are influenced by our emotions. It is only logical, then, to look at the affective (emotional) domain for some of the most significant answers to the problems of contrasting the differences between first and second language acquisition.

Research on the affective domain in second language acquisition has been mounting steadily for a number of decades. This research has been inspired by a number of factors. Not the least of these is the fact that linguistic theory is now

asking the deepest possible questions about human language, with some applied linguists examining the inner being of the person to discover if, in the affective side of human behavior, there lies an explanation to the mysteries of language acquisition. A full treatment of affective variables in second language acquisition is provided in Chapters 6 and 7; in this chapter it is important to take a brief look at selected affective factors as they relate to the age and acquisition issue.

The affective domain includes many factors: empathy, self-esteem, extroversion, inhibition, imitation, anxiety, attitudes—the list could go on. Some of these may seem at first rather far removed from language learning, but when we consider the pervasive nature of language, any affective factor can conceivably be relevant to second language learning.

A case in point is the role of **egocentricity** in human development. Very young children are highly egocentric. The world revolves about them, and they see all events as focusing on themselves. Small babies at first do not even distinguish a separation between themselves and the world around them. A rattle held in a baby's hand, for example, is simply an inseparable extension of the baby as long as it is grasped; when the baby drops it or loses sight of it, the rattle ceases to exist. As children grow older they become more aware of themselves, more self-conscious as they seek both to define and to understand their self-identity. In preadolescence children develop an acute consciousness of themselves as separate and identifiable entities but ones which, in their still-wavering insecurity, need protecting. They therefore develop **inhibitions** about this self-identity, fearing to expose too much self-doubt. At puberty these inhibitions are heightened in the trauma of undergoing critical physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. Adolescents must acquire a totally new physical, cognitive, and emotional identity. Their egos are affected not only in how they understand themselves but also in how they reach out beyond themselves, how they relate to others socially, and how they use the communicative process to bring on affective equilibrium.

Several decades ago, Alexander Guiora, a researcher in the study of personality variables in second language learning, proposed what he called the **language ego** (Guiora et al., 1972b; see also Dörnyei, 2005; Ehrman, 1993) to account for the identity a person develops in reference to the language he or she speaks. For any monolingual person, the language ego involves the interaction of the native language and ego development. Oneself-identity is inextricably bound up with one's language, for it is in the communicative process—the process of sending out messages and having them “bounced” back—that such identities are confirmed, shaped, and reshaped. Guiora suggested that the language ego may account for the difficulties that adults have in learning a second language.

The child's ego is dynamic and growing and flexible through the age of puberty. Thus a new language at this stage does not pose a substantial “threat” or inhibition to the ego, and adaptation is made relatively easily as long as there are no undue confounding sociocultural factors such as, for example, a damaging attitude toward a language or language group at a young age. Then the simultaneous physical, emotional, and cognitive changes of puberty give rise to a defensive mechanism in

which the language ego becomes protective and defensive. The language ego clings to the security of the native language to protect the fragile ego of the young adult. The language ego, which has now become part and parcel of self-identity, is threatened, and thus a context develops in which you must be willing to make a fool of yourself in the trial-and-error struggle of speaking and understanding a foreign language. Younger children are less frightened because they are less aware of language *forms*, and the possibility of making mistakes in those forms—mistakes that one really must make in an attempt to communicate spontaneously—does not concern them greatly.

It is no wonder, then, that the acquisition of a new language ego is an enormous undertaking not only for young adolescents but also for an adult who has grown comfortable and secure in his or her own identity and who possesses inhibitions that serve as a wall of defensive protection around the ego. Making the leap to a new or second identity is no simple matter; it can be successful only when one musters the necessary ego strength to overcome inhibitions. It is possible that the successful adult language learner is someone who can bridge this affective gap. Some of the seeds of success might have been sown early in life. In a bilingual setting, for example, if a child has already learned one second language in childhood, then affectively, learning a third language as an adult might represent much less of a threat. Or such seeds may be independent of a bilingual setting; they may simply have arisen out of whatever combination of nature and nurture makes for the development of a strong ego.

#### CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

**Research Findings:** It is common to find research that compares children and adults acquiring second languages, with the assumption that the two categories are easily defined. But not enough research examines differences between younger (6–7-year-old) and older (10–11-year-old) children.

**Teaching Implications:** If you were teaching two groups of children—a 6–7-year-old group and a 10–11-year-old group—how would your approach and classroom activities differ?

In looking at SLA in children, it is important to distinguish younger and older children. Preadolescent children of 9 or 10, for example, are beginning to develop inhibitions, and it is conceivable that children of this age have a good deal of affective dissonance to overcome as they attempt to learn a second language. This could account for difficulties that older prepubescent children encounter in acquiring a

second language. Adult vs. child comparisons are, of course, highly relevant. We know from both observational and research evidence that mature adults manifest a number of inhibitions. These inhibitions surface in modern language classes where the learner's attempts to speak in the foreign language are often fraught with embarrassment. We have also observed the same inhibition in the "natural" setting (a nonclassroom setting, such as a learner living in a foreign culture), although in such instances there is the likelihood that the necessity to communicate overrides the inhibitions.

Other affective factors seem to hinge on the basic notion of ego identification. It would appear that the study of second language learning as the acquisition of a **second identity** might pose a fruitful and important issue in understanding not only some differences between child and adult first and second language learning but second language learning in general (see Chapter 7).

Another affectively related variable deserves mention here even though it will be given fuller consideration in Chapter 6: the role of **attitudes** in language learning. From the growing body of literature on attitudes, it seems clear that negative attitudes can affect success in learning a language. Very young children, who are not developed enough cognitively to possess "attitudes" toward races, cultures, ethnic groups, classes of people, and languages, may be less affected than adults. Macnamara (1975, p. 79) noted that "a child suddenly transported from Montreal to Berlin will rapidly learn German no matter what he thinks of the Germans." But as children reach school age, they also begin to acquire certain attitudes toward types and stereotypes of people. Most of these attitudes are "taught," consciously or unconsciously, by parents, other adults, and peers. The learning of negative attitudes toward the people who speak the second language or toward the second language itself has been shown to affect the success of language learning in persons from school age on up.

Finally, **peer pressure** is a particularly important variable in considering child-adult comparisons. The peer pressure children encounter in language learning is quite unlike what the adult experiences. Children usually have strong constraints upon them to conform. They are told in words, thoughts, and actions that they had better "be like the rest of the kids." Such peer pressure extends to language. Adults experience some peer pressure, but of a different kind. Adults tend to tolerate linguistic differences more than children, and therefore errors in speech are more easily excused. If adults can understand a second language speaker, for example, they will usually provide positive cognitive and affective feedback, a level of tolerance that might encourage some adult learners to "get by." Children are harsher critics of one another's actions and words and may thus provide a necessary and sufficient degree of mutual pressure to learn the second language.

## LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

We have so far looked at learners themselves and considered a number of different issues in age and acquisition. Now we turn to some issues that center on the

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subject matter itself: language. What are some of the linguistic considerations in age-related questions about SLA? A growing number of research studies are now available to shed some light on the linguistic processes of second language learning and how those processes differ between children and adults. A good deal of this research will be treated in Chapters 8 through 10, but here we will look briefly at some specific issues that arise in examining the child's acquisition of a second language.

### Bilingualism

It is clear that children learning two languages simultaneously acquire them by the use of similar strategies. They are, in essence, learning two first languages, and the key to success is in distinguishing separate contexts for the two languages. People who learn a second language in such separate contexts can often be described as coordinate bilinguals; they have two meaning systems, as opposed to compound bilinguals who have one meaning system from which both languages operate. Children generally do not have problems with "mixing up languages," regardless of the separateness of contexts for use of the languages. Moreover, "bilinguals are not two monolinguals in the same head" (Cook, 1995, p. 58). Most bilinguals, however, engage in **code-switching** (the act of inserting words, phrases, or even longer stretches of one language into the other), especially when communicating with another bilingual.

In some cases the acquisition of both languages in bilingual children is slightly slower than the normal schedule for first language acquisition. However, a respectable stockpile of research (see Reynolds, 1991; Schinke-Llano, 1989) shows a considerable cognitive benefit of early childhood bilingualism, supporting Lambert's (1972) contention that bilingual children are more facile at concept formation and have a greater mental flexibility.

### Interference Between First and Second Languages

A good deal of the research on nonsimultaneous second language acquisition, in both children and adults, has focused on the interfering effects of the first and second languages. For the most part, research confirms that the linguistic and cognitive processes of second language learning in young children are in general similar to first language processes. Hansen-Bede (1975), Milon (1974), Ervin-Tripp (1974), Dulay and Burt (1974a), Natalicio and Natalicio (1971), and Ravem (1968), among others, concluded that similar strategies and linguistic features are present in both first and second language learning in children. Dulay and Burt (1974a) found, for example, that 86 percent of more than 500 errors made by Spanish-speaking children learning English reflected normal developmental characteristics—that is, expected intralingual strategies, not interference errors from the first language. Hansen-Bede (1975) examined such linguistic structures as possession, gender, word order, verb forms, questions, and negation in an English-speaking three-year-old child

who learned Urdu upon moving to Pakistan. In spite of some marked linguistic contrasts between English and Urdu, the child's acquisition did not appear to show first language interference and, except for negation, showed similar strategies and rules for both the first and the second language.

Adult second language linguistic processes are more vulnerable to the effect of the first language on the second, especially the farther apart the two events are. Whether adults learn a foreign language in a classroom or out in the "arena," they approach the second language—either focally or peripherally—systematically, and they attempt to formulate linguistic rules on the basis of whatever linguistic information is available to them: information from the native language, the second language, teachers, classmates, and peers. The nature and sequencing of these systems has been the subject of a good deal of second language research in the last half of the twentieth century. What we have learned above all else from this research is that the saliency of interference from the first language does not imply that interference is the most relevant or most crucial factor in adult second language acquisition. Adults learning a second language manifest some of the same types of errors found in children learning their first language (see Chapter 8).

Adults, more cognitively secure, appear to operate from the solid foundation of the first language and thus manifest more interference. But it was pointed out earlier that adults, too, manifest errors not unlike some of the errors children make, the result of creative perception of the second language and an attempt to discover its rules apart from the rules of the first language. The first language, however, may be more readily used to bridge gaps that the adult learner cannot fill by generalization within the second language. In this case we do well to remember that the first language can be a facilitating factor, and not just an interfering factor.

### Order of Acquisition

One of the first steps toward demonstrating the importance of factors beyond first language interference was taken in a series of research studies by Heidi Dulay and Marina Burt (1972, 1974a, 1974b, 1976). Emphasizing the absence of L1 interference, they claimed that "transfer of L1 syntactic patterns rarely occurs" in child second language acquisition (1976, p. 72). They claimed that children learning a second language use a **creative construction** process, just as they do in their first language.

This conclusion was supported by voluminous research data collected on the acquisition order of eleven English morphemes in children learning English as a second language. Dulay and Burt found a common order of acquisition among children of several native language backgrounds, an order very similar to that found by Roger Brown (1973) using the same morphemes but for children acquiring English as their first language:

1. present progressive (*-ing*)
2. [and 3.] *in, on*

(continued)

4. plural (-s)
5. past irregular
6. possessive ('s)
7. uncontractible copula (*is, am, are*)
8. articles (*a, the*)
9. past regular (-ed)
10. third-person regular (-s)
11. third-person irregular

There were logical and methodological arguments about the validity of morpheme-order findings. Rosansky (1976) argued that the statistical procedures used were suspect, and others (Roger Andersen, 1978; Larsen-Freeman, 1976) noted that 11 English morphemes constitute only a minute portion of English syntax, and therefore lack generalizability. On the other hand, Zobl and Liceras (1994, p. 161), in a "search for a unified theoretical account for the L1 and L2 morpheme orders," reexamined the morpheme-order studies and concluded the generalizability of morpheme acquisition order.

In a resurgence of research on order of acquisition, the topic has emerged as an important consideration both in studies of age and acquisition and in the search for universals in language acquisition. A nagging question in earlier research centered on the search for *causes* of ostensibly universal patterns of acquisition, a question that most studies left unaddressed. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) contended that the earlier morpheme studies were too focused on morphology and on a form-oriented approach, and showed that attention to a semantic-oriented approach had more explanatory power. So, for example, the role of tense and aspect markers across languages offered a better explanation of why both children in their first language and adults in their second language acquisition exhibit a common order of acquisition.

Even more recently, Goldschneider & DeKeyser (2005, 2001) reported on studies that refined earlier claims about acquisition order by proposing five determinants of acquisition order across numerous languages:

1. Perceptual salience (how easy it is to see or hear a given structure)
2. Semantic complexity (how many meanings are expressed by a particular form)
3. Morpho-phonological regularity (the degree to which language forms are affected by their phonological environment)
4. Syntactic category (grammatical characteristics of forms)
5. Frequency in the input (the number of times a given structure occurs in speech addressed to the learner)

While they did not make strong claims for the predictive validity of the above five determinants, they remained optimistic that these determinants hold promise as a useful meta-analysis of data that heretofore remained somewhat mysterious. Further, Goldschneider and DeKeyser suggested that "teachers could make the

predictors work for them and could potentially increase the rate of acquisition by presenting material on functors in a way that capitalizes on these causes" (2005, p. 63).

## ISSUES IN FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION REVISITED

Having examined the comparison of first and second language acquisition across a number of domains of human behavior, we turn in this final section to a brief consideration of the eight issues in first language acquisition that were presented in Chapter 2. In most cases the implications of these issues are already clear, from the comments in the previous chapter, from the reader's logical thinking, or from comments in this chapter. Therefore what follows is a way of highlighting the implications of the issues for second language learning.

### Competence and Performance

It is as difficult to "get at" linguistic competence in a second language as it is in a first. For children, judgments of grammaticality may elicit a second language "pop-go-weasel" effect. You can be a little more direct in inferring competence in adults; adults can make choices between two alternative forms, and sometimes they manifest an awareness of grammaticality in a second language. But you must remember that adults are not in general able to verbalize "rules" and paradigms consciously even in their native language. Furthermore, in judging utterances in the modern language classroom and responses on various tests, teachers need to be cautiously attentive to the discrepancy between performance on a given day or in a given context and competence in a second language in general. Remember that one isolated sample of second language speech may on the surface appear to be rather malformed until you consider that sample in comparison with the everyday mistakes and errors of native speakers.

### Comprehension and Production

Whether or not comprehension is derived from a separate level of competence, there is a universal distinction between comprehension and production. Learning a second language usually means learning to speak it *and* to comprehend it! When we say "Do you speak English?" or "Parlez-vous français?" we usually mean "and do you *understand* it, too?" Learning involves both modes (unless you are interested only in, say, learning to read in the second language). So teaching involves attending to both comprehension and production and the full consideration of the gaps and differences between the two. Adult second language learners will, like children, often *hear* a distinction but not be able to produce it. The inability to produce an item, therefore, should not be taken to mean that the learner cannot comprehend the item.



### Nature or Nurture?

What happens after puberty to the magic "little black box" called LAD? Does the adult suffer from linguistic "hardening of the arteries"? Does LAD "grow up" somehow? Does lateralization signal the death of LAD? We do not have complete answers to these questions, but there have been some hints in the discussion of physical, cognitive, and affective factors. What we do know is that adults and children alike appear to have the capacity to acquire a second language at any age. The only trick that nature might play on adults is to virtually rule out the acquisition of authentic accent. As you have seen above, this still leaves a wide swath of language properties that may actually be more efficiently acquired in an adult. If an adult does not acquire a second language successfully, it is probably because of intervening cognitive or affective variables and not the absence of innate capacities. Defining those intervening variables appears to be more relevant than probing the properties of innateness.

### Universals

In recent years Universal Grammar has come to the attention of a growing number of researchers. The conclusions from this research are mixed (Van Buren, 1996). Research on child SLA suggests that children's developing second language grammars are indeed constrained by UG (Lakshmanan, 1995). But it is not immediately clear whether this knowledge is available directly from a truly universal "source," or through the mediation of the first language. Yet even in the first language, UG seems to predict certain syntactic domains but not others. This has led some to conclude that second language learners have only "partial access" to UG (O'Grady, 1996). But Bley-Vroman (1988) went a step further in claiming a "no access" position for adults learning a second language: adults acquire second language systems without any reference to UG.

Others disagree strongly with the partial- and no-access claim. Cook (1993, p. 244) provocatively asked, "Why should second language users be treated as failed monolinguals? ... A proper account of second language learning would treat multilingualism on its own terms, not in L1 related terms." In other words, why look to monolingualism as a standard by which UG or any other means of inquiry should be modeled? If UG models do not fit second language learning processes, then it may be "the description of UG that is at fault, and not the L2 learner" (Cook, 1993, p. 245). Where does this leave us? Perhaps in a position of keeping an open mind as teachers and an inquisitive spirit as researchers.

### Systematicity and Variability

It is clear that second language acquisition, both child and adult, is characterized by both systematicity and variability. Second language linguistic development appears in many instances to mirror the first language acquisition process: learners induce

rules, generalize across a category, overgeneralize, and proceed in stages of development (more on this in Chapter 9). Recent research has suggested that even the order of acquisition may universally follow certain identifiable determinants (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2005). The variability of second language data poses thorny problems that have been addressed by people like Gass and Selinker (2001), Preston (1996), Ellis (1989, 1987), and Tarone (1988). The variability of second language acquisition is exacerbated by a host of cognitive, affective, cultural, and contextual variables that are sometimes not applicable to a first language learning situation.

## Language and Thought

Another intricately complex issue in both first and second language acquisition is the precise relationship between language and thought. We can see that language helps to shape thinking and that thinking helps to shape language. What happens to this interdependence when a second language is acquired? Does the bilingual person's memory consist of one storage system (compound bilingualism) or two (coordinate bilingualism)? The second language learner is clearly presented with a tremendous task in sorting out new meanings from old, distinguishing thoughts and concepts in one language that are similar but not quite parallel to the second language, perhaps really acquiring a whole new system of conceptualization. The second language teacher needs to be acutely aware of cultural thought patterns that may be as interfering as the linguistic patterns themselves.

## Imitation

While children are good deep-structure imitators (centering on meaning, not surface features), adults can fare much better in imitating surface structure (by rote mechanisms) if they are explicitly directed to do so. Sometimes their ability to center on surface distinctions is a distracting factor; at other times it is helpful. Adults learning a second language might do well to attend consciously to truth value and to be less aware of surface structure as they communicate. The implication is that meaningful contexts for language learning are necessary; second language learners ought not to become too preoccupied with form lest they lose sight of the function and purpose of language.

## Practice and Frequency

Too many language classes are filled with rote practice that centers on surface forms. Most cognitive psychologists agree that the frequency of stimuli and the number of times spent practicing a form are not highly important in learning an item. What is important is meaningfulness. While some researchers quibble on the issue of frequency (Ellis, 2002), in the case of second language learning, it appears that contextualized, appropriate, meaningful communication in the second language seems to be the best possible practice the second language learner could engage in.

## Input

In the case of classroom second language learning, parental input is replaced by teacher input. Teachers might do well to be as deliberate, but meaningful, in their communications with students as the parent is to the child since input is as important to the second language learner as it is to the first language learner. And that input should foster meaningful communicative use of the language in appropriate contexts.

## Discourse

We have only begun to scratch the surface of possibilities of second language discourse analysis. As we search for better ways of teaching communicative competence to second language learners, research on the acquisition of discourse becomes more and more important. Perhaps a study of children's amazing dexterity in acquiring rules of conversation and in perceiving intended meaning will help us to find ways of teaching such capacities to second language learners. We will look more at these issues in Chapter 9.

## SOME "AGE-AND-ACQUISITION-INSPIRED" LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS

In Chapter 2, we saw that research on language teaching in the "modern" era may have been sparked by François Gouin's observation of his young nephew's *first* language acquisition. Another look at language teaching methodology in a historical context reveals a number of instances of methods that were inspired by observation of and research on child *second* language acquisition. Two of these methods are described here, as examples of extending an understanding of children's second language acquisition to the adult second language classroom.

### Total Physical Response

The founder of the **Total Physical Response (TPR)** method, James Asher (1977), noted that children, in learning their first language, appear to do a lot of listening before they speak, and that their listening is accompanied by physical responses (reaching, grabbing, moving, looking, and so forth). He also gave some attention to right-brain learning. According to Asher, motor activity is a right-brain function that should precede left-brain language processing. Asher was also convinced that language classes were often the locus of too much anxiety and wished to devise a method that was as stress-free as possible, where learners would not feel overly self-conscious and defensive. The TPR classroom, then, was one in which students did a great deal of listening and acting. The teacher was very directive in orchestrating a performance: "The instructor is the director of a stage play in which the students are the actors" (Asher, 1977, p. 43).

A typical TPR class utilized the imperative mood, even at more advanced proficiency levels. Commands were an easy way to get learners to move about and to loosen up: "Open the window," "Close the door," "Stand up," "Sit down," "Pick up the book," "Give it to John," and so on. No verbal response was necessary. More complex syntax was incorporated into the imperative: "Draw a rectangle on the chalkboard." "Walk quickly to the door and hit it." Humor was easy to introduce: "Walk slowly to the window and jump." "Put your toothbrush in your book" (Asher, 1977, p. 55). Interrogatives were also easily dealt with: "Where is the book?" "Who is John?" (students point to the book or to John). Eventually students, one by one, presumably felt comfortable enough to venture verbal responses to questions, then to ask questions themselves, and the process continued.

Like other methods of the twentieth century, TPR—as a method—had its limitations. It was especially effective in the beginning levels of language proficiency, but lost its distinctiveness as learners advanced in their competence. But today TPR is used more as a type of classroom *activity*, which is a more useful way to view it. Many successful communicative, interactive classrooms utilize TPR activities to provide both auditory input and physical activity.

### The Natural Approach

Stephen Krashen's (1982) theories of second language acquisition have been widely discussed and hotly debated since the 1970s. (Chapter 10 will offer further details on Krashen's influence on second language acquisition theory.) One of the hallmarks of Krashen's theories is that adults should acquire a second language just as children do: they should be given the opportunity to "pick up" a language, and shouldn't be forced to "study" grammar in the classroom.

The major methodological offshoot of Krashen's work was manifested in the **Natural Approach**, developed by one of Krashen's associates, Tracy Terrell (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Acting on many of the claims that Asher made for TPR, Krashen and Terrell felt that learners would benefit from delaying production until speech "emerges," that learners should be as relaxed as possible in the classroom, and that a great deal of communication and "acquisition" should take place, as opposed to analysis. In fact, the Natural Approach advocated the use of TPR activities at the beginning level of language learning, when "comprehensible input" is essential for triggering the acquisition of language.

The Natural Approach was aimed at the goal of basic interpersonal communication skills, that is, everyday language situations—conversations, shopping, listening to the radio, and the like. The initial task of the teacher was to provide comprehensible input—spoken language that is understandable to the learner—or just a little beyond the learner's level. Learners did not need to say anything during this "silent period" until they felt ready to do so. The teacher was the source of the learners' input and the creator of an interesting and stimulating variety of classroom activities—commands, games, skits, and small-group work.



The most controversial aspects of the Natural Approach were its "silent period" and its reliance on the notion of "comprehensible input." One could argue, with Richards & Rodgers (2001) and Gibbons (1985), that the delay of oral production can be pushed too far and that at an early stage it is important for the teacher to step in and encourage students to talk. And determining just what we mean by "comprehensible" is exceedingly difficult (see Chapter 10 for further comments). Language learning is an interactive process, and therefore an overreliance on the role of input at the expense of the stimulation of output could thwart the second language acquisition process. The Natural Approach, like TPR, also tended to lose its distinctive identity once a course was well under way.

But, of course, we also can look at the Natural Approach and be reminded that sometimes we insist that students speak much too soon, thereby raising anxiety and lessening the possibility of further risk-taking as the learner tries to progress. And so, once again, your responsibility as a teacher is to choose the best of what others have experimented with, and to adapt those insights to your own situation. There is a good deal of insight to be gained, and intuition to be developed, from examining the merits of methods such as TPR and the Natural Approach. Those insights and intuitions can become a part of your own cautious, enlightened eclecticism.



In this chapter we have touched on a number of significant perspectives on questions about age and acquisition. In all this, it is important to maintain the distinction among the three types (C1-C2; C2-A2; C1-A2) of age and language comparisons mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. By considering three logically possible comparisons, unnecessary loopholes in reasoning should be minimized. While some answers to our questions are less than conclusive, in many cases research has been historically revealing. By operating on our collective understanding of the effects of age on acquisition, you can, with some confidence, construct your own personal integrated understanding of that relationship, and how that relationship might hold fruitful implications for second language teaching.

Above all else, I call attention to the balanced perspective offered by Scovel (1999, p. 1):

"The younger, the better" is a myth that has been fueled by media hype and, sometimes, "junk science." We are led to believe that children are better at learning foreign languages without fully considering all the evidence and without looking at all aspects of acquisition. On at least several planes—literacy, vocabulary, pragmatics, schematic knowledge, and even syntax—adults have been shown to be superior learners. Perpetuating a younger-the-better myth in arguments about bilingual education and other forms of early language intervention does a disservice to our children and to our educational enterprise.

We have seen in this chapter that there certainly appear to be some potential advantages to an early age for SLA, but there is absolutely no evidence that an adult cannot overcome all of those disadvantages save one, accent, and the latter is hardly the quintessential criterion for effective interpersonal communication.

## TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

Note: (I) individual work; (G) group or pair work; (C) whole-class discussion.

1. (G/C) Each group or pair should be assigned one of the seven common arguments (page 55) cited by Stern (1970) that were used to justify analogies between first language learning and second language teaching. In the group, determine what is assumed or presupposed in the statement. Then reiterate the flaw in each analogy. Report conclusions back to the whole class for further discussion.
2. (C) Are there students in the class who were exposed to, or learned, second languages before puberty? What were the circumstances, and what difficulties, if any, were encountered? Has authentic pronunciation in the language remained to this day?
3. (C) Is there anyone in the class, or anyone who knows someone else, who started learning a second language after puberty and who nevertheless has an almost "perfect" accent? How did you assess whether the accent was perfect? Why do you suppose such a person was able to be so successful?
4. (I) In your words, write down the essence of Scovel's claim that the acquisition of a native accent around the age of puberty is an evolutionary leftover of sociobiological critical periods evident in many species of animals and birds. In view of widely accepted cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and interracial marriages today, how relevant is the biological claim for mating within the gene pool?
5. (G/C) In groups, try to determine the criteria for deciding whether or not someone is an authentic native speaker of your native language. In the process, consider the wide variety of "World Englishes" commonly spoken today. How clearly definitive can your criteria be? Talk about occupations, if any, in which a native accent is indispensable. Share with the rest of the class, and try to come to a consensus.
6. (G) In groups, talk about any cognitive or affective blocks you have experienced in your own attempts to learn a second language. What could you do (or what could you have done) to overcome those barriers?
7. (I) Summarize the 10 "revisited" issues in your own words. How does your understanding of those issues, as they apply to second language learning, help you to formulate a better understanding of the total process of second language

- acquisition? Cite what you think might be some practical classroom implications of the 10 issues.
8. (C) Do you think it is worthwhile to teach children a second language in the classroom? If so, how might approaches and methods differ between a class of children and a class of adults?

### SUGGESTED READINGS

- Scovel, T. (2000). A critical review of the critical period hypothesis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 20, 213-223.
- Singleton, D. (2001). Age and second language acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 77-89.
- Singleton, D., & Ryan, L. (2004). *Language acquisition: The age factor* (2nd ed.). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

*The two review articles by Thomas Scovel and David Singleton, in successive years of the Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, offer excellent overviews of issues and research on the critical period hypothesis and questions about the relationship of age to acquisition. Singleton and Ryan's book gives updated and more detailed discussions of the same issues, with an excellent synopsis of first language evidence and second language evidence in two separate chapters.*

- DeKeyser, R. (2000). The robustness of critical period effects in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22, 499-533.

- Bialystok, E. (2002). On the reliability of robustness: A reply to DeKeyser. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 24, 481-488.

*Robert DeKeyser's article reports a study in which he examined hypotheses concerning the existence of a critical period for second language acquisition. While he concludes that his data support his hypotheses, Ellen Bialystok argues otherwise, citing problems in DeKeyser's interpretation of the data. This exchange is a good example of the process of carrying out and interpreting research data, and of varying interpretations of the same data.*

- Goldschneider, J., & DeKeyser, R. (2001). Explaining the "natural order of L2 morpheme acquisition" in English: A meta-analysis of multiple determinants. *Language Learning*, 51, 1-50.

*For about two decades, researchers had virtually dismissed "natural order" claims as a dead issue, with no viable explanations for the possibility of natural orders in the acquisition of morphemes. Here, the authors revive the debate by offering underlying principles that potentially explain order of acquisition.*

## LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE: JOURNAL ENTRY 3

Note: See pages 21 and 22 of Chapter 1 for general guidelines for writing a journal on a previous or concurrent language learning experience.

- How good do you think your pronunciation of your foreign language is? How do you feel about your pronunciation—satisfied, dissatisfied, resigned, in need of improvement? Assuming you would not expect to be “perfect,” what steps can you take (or could you have taken) to improve your pronunciation to a point of maximum clarity of articulation?
- Given your current age (or your age when you were learning a foreign language), do you feel you’re too old to make much progress? Are you linguistically “over the hill” with little hope of achieving your goals? Analyze the roots of your answers to these questions.
- Children might have some secrets of success: not monitoring themselves too much, not analyzing grammar, not being too worried about their egos, shedding inhibitions, not letting the native language interfere much. In what way did you, or could you, put those secrets to use in your own learning?
- In learning a foreign language, were any aspects (such as listening discrimination exercises, pronunciation drills, learning grammar rules, small group conversations, reading, or writing) easier than others for you? Analyze what made certain procedures easier than others.
- Do you think you might have some advantages over children in learning a foreign language? Speculate on what those advantages might be. Then make a list of strategies you could use to capitalize on those advantages.